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Secret History of the Vietnam Tragedy

Disclosure of the findings of an inquiry privately ordered by then Secretary of Defense McNamara into the origins and expansions of the U. S. role in Vietnam could hardly have come at a more critical moment. For this week the Senate will vote on whether to legislate U. S. withdrawal from the conflict or abdicate responsibility.

In the light of the material already unfolded by the Times in the first installments of its excerpts from the secret study, the case for decisive Congressional initiative is clearer than ever. What many have surmised has now been devastatingly documented. And the revelations about the past—the exploration ends in 1968—raise profound new doubts about the present Administration's reluctance to set a firm timetable for withdrawal and the continued use of massive American air power to support the strategically and morally dubious policy of Vietnamization.

The McNamara investigation (in which he exposed himself and his associates to serious evidence of dissembling) leaves some large questions unanswered, partly because one key chapter—the secret diplomacy of the Johnson era—reportedly was not obtained. But what has already been published dramatizes the degree to which the American people and the Congress were kept uninformed — or actively deceived — about the U. S. role in Vietnam from the time Harry Truman decided we had to support the French colonialists in their war against the Communist-led Vietminh.

The essential misjudgments, miscalculations and amoralities embodied in that decision were to be perpetuated under the Eisenhower and Kennedy regimes and finally to result in the large-scale escalation of the war under Lyndon Johnson.

Among the innumerable issues raised by what has been revealed so far, several deserve urgent attention by the Senate.

The first is that a "clandestine" war was, in effect, begun by the U. S. in 1964 and openly enlarged by the bombing of North Vietnam in 1965, despite the judgment of the much-maligned CIA that these steps would not cause Hanoi to retreat, and that the bombing would prove wholly ineffective.

The second is that the music was written for the celebrated Gulf of Tonkin resolution long before any real or alleged incident occurred—and that what can be read, despite disclaimers, as a scenario of provocation had been fashioned before the Senate blindly bought the Tonkin story.

The third is that sharp but unrevealed challenges to the "domino" theory were voiced by intelligence officials even as that doctrine became the rationale for widening the war.

The fourth is that the chance of a peace in Vietnam—presumably based on "neutralization"—was viewed with apprehension by Washington as the escalation of 1965 was launched.

More of the report is still to emerge. Some of its conclusions will invite debate from men involved in these events. But the impact of the record published so far should shake the Senate. It should finally shatter the notion that our elected representatives have no right to question high-level policy decisions made by "well-intentioned" Presidents, whether Democratic or Republican. It should persuade wavering men that the moment is at hand for Congress to say "enough"—now.

NEW-YORK TIMES
14 JUN 1971

KEY TEXTS FI
ENTAGON'S VIETNA

Following are texts of key documents from the Pentagon's story of the Vietnam war, covering events of August, 1964, February, 1965, the period in which the bombing of North Vietnam was planned. Except where excerpting is specified, the documents are printed verbatim, with only unmistakable typographical errors corrected.

Rusk Cable to Embassy in Laos On Search and Rescue Flights

Cablegram from Secretary of State Dean Rusk to the United States Embassy in Vientiane, Laos, Aug. 26, 1964. A copy of this message was sent to the Commander in Chief, Pacific.

We agree with your assessment of importance SAR operations that Air America pilots can play critically important role, and SAR efforts should not discriminate between rescuing Americans, Thais and Lao. You are also hereby granted as requested discretionary authority to use AA pilots in T-28's for SAR operations when you consider this indispensable rpt indispensable to success of operation and with understanding that you will seek advance Washington authorization wherever situation permits.

At same time, we believe time has come to review scope and control arrangements for T-28 operations extending into future. Such a review is especially indicated view fact that these operations more or less automatically impose demands for use of US personnel in SAR operations. Moreover, increased AA capability clearly means possibilities of loss somewhat increased, and each loss with accompanying SAR operations involves chance of escalation from one action to another in ways that may not be desirable in wider picture. On other side, we naturally recognize T-28 operations are vital both for their military and psychological effects in Laos and as negotiating card in support of Souvanna's position. Request your view whether balance of above factors would call for some reduction in scale of operations and-or dropping of some of better-defended targets. (Possible extension T-28 operations to Panhandle would be separate issue and will be covered by septel.)

On central problem our understanding is that Thai pilots fly missions strictly controlled by your Air Command Center with [word illegible] in effective control, but that this not true of Lao pilots. We have impression latter not really under any kind of firm control.

Request your evaluation and recommendations as to future scope T-28 operations and your comments as to whether our impressions present control structure correct and whether steps could be taken to tighten this.

Rusk Query to Vientiane Embassy On Desirability of Laos Cease-Fire

Cablegram from Secretary of State Rusk to the United States Embassy in Laos, Aug. 7, 1964. Copies were also sent, with a request for comment, to the American missions in London, Paris, Saigon, Bangkok, Ottawa, New Delhi, Moscow, Pnompenh and Hong Kong, and to the Pacific command and the mission at the United Nations.

1. As pointed out in your 219, our objective in Laos is to stabilize the situation again, if possible within framework of the 1962 Geneva settlement. Essential to stabilization would be establishment of military equilibrium in the country. Moreover, we have some concern that recent RLG successes and reported low PL morale may lead to some escalation from Communist side, which we do not now wish to have to deal with.

2. Until now, Souvanna's and our po[illegible] would require Pathet Lao withdrawal from areas seized in PDJ since May 15 and that suc precondition ference. Que: ritorial gains vided they c practice bro equilibrium no longer n Lao withdra tion to 14-n fact though curred to So is also touc to Butler (Souvanna a PDJ withdr evitably ins gains, and arrangemen present fa division. I were to be best be don it might be used by Souvanna as bargaining counter in obtaining satisfaction on his other condition that he attend conference as head of Laotian Government. Remaining condition would be cease-fire. While under present conditions cease-fire might not be of net advantage to Souvanna—we are thinking primarily of T-28 operations—Pathet Lao would no doubt insist on it. If so, Souvanna could press for effective ICC policing of cease-fire. Latter could be of importance in upcoming period.

3. Above is written with thought in mind that Polish proposals [one word illegible] effectively collapsed and that pressures continue for Geneva [word illegible] conference and will no doubt be intensified by current crisis brought on by DRV naval attacks. Conference on Laos might be useful safety valve for these generalized pressures while at same time providing some deterrent to escalation of hostilities on that part of the "front." We would insist that conference be limited to Laos and believe that it could in fact be so limited, if necessary by our withdrawing from the conference room if any other subject brought up, as we did in 1961-62. Side discussions on other topics could not be avoided but we see no great difficulty with this; venue for informal corridor discussion with PL, DRV, and Chicoms could be valuable at this juncture.

4. In considering this course of action, key initial question is of course whether Souvanna himself is prepared to drop his withdrawal precondition and whether, if he did, he could maintain himself in power in Vientiane. We gather that answer to first question is probably yes but we are much more dubious about

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Continued

WASHINGTON POST
14 JUN 1971

U.S. Planned Before Tonkin For War on North, Files Show

By Murrey Marder
and Chalmers M. Roberts
Washington Post Staff Writers

The Johnson administration planned for major American military action against North Vietnam nearly five months before the 1964 Tonkin Gulf incident, according to secret government documents made public yesterday by The New York Times.

These plans were made, the documents show, at a time when the United States already was directing clandestine sabotage operations in the North.

Two months before the attack on two American destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin on Aug. 2 and 4, 1964, the administration sent a Canadian diplomat, J. Blair Seaborn, on a secret mission to Hanoi where he is quoted as telling Premier Pham Van Dong that "in the event of escalation (of the war) the greatest devastation would result for the D.R.V. (North Vietnam) itself."

It was the Tonkin incident—called totally unprovoked by the administration—which led Congress on Aug. 7, 1964, to pass a resolution declaring that the United States was "prepared, as the President directs, to take all necessary steps, including the use of armed force," to assist South Vietnam. It was on this resolution that President Johnson subsequently leaned heavily to widen the war.

The documents are part of a multi-volumed collection of records and comments assembled under the direction of then Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara. The bulk of the documents disclosed thus far by the Times are of military origin but include some White House and State Department papers that reached the Pentagon. Other documents were only alluded to or quoted from in the newspaper's story.

A National Security Action Memorandum of March 17 1964, presumably the result of a presidential decision, set out both the administration's political aims and the basis for its military planning. A cable sent three days later by the President to Henry Cabot Lodge, then the American ambassador in Saigon, illuminates his intentions.

The memorandum says that "we seek an independent non-Communist South Vietnam" but "do not require that it serve as a Western base or as a member of a Western alliance. South Vietnam must be free, however, to accept outside assistance as required to maintain its security."

Repeating language from a McNamara memorandum of March 16 to the President (language in part drawn in turn from a memorandum to McNamara on Jan. 22 from the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor) the National Security Council document reflects the prevailing belief in what President Eisenhower had called the "domino effect" of the loss of South Vietnam.

Unless the objective is achieved in South Vietnam, it says, "almost all of Southeast Asia will probably fall under Communist dominance" or accommodate to Communism. The Philippines, it was judged, "would become shaky" and "the threat to India on the west, Australia and New Zealand to the South, and Taiwan, Korea, and Japan to the north would be greatly increased."

The policy decision, then, was to "prepare immediately to be in a position on 72 hours' notice to initiate the full range of Laotian and Cambodian 'border control actions'" as well as "the 'retaliatory actions' against North Vietnam and to be in a position on 30 days' notice to initiate the program of 'graduated overt military pressure' against North Vietnam . . ."

The President's cable to Lodge says that "our planning for action against the North is [illegible] grounds that 'overt military action" then was "premature." Mr. Johnson offered as one reason that statement that "we expect a showdown between the Chinese and Soviet Communist parties and action against the North will be more practicable after than before a showdown."

The President also told Lodge that part of his job then was "knocking down the idea of neutralization" of Vietnam, an idea advanced by then French President Charles deGaulle, "wherever it rears its ugly head and on this point I think that nothing is more important than to stop neutralist talk wherever we can by whatever means we can."

The resulting contingency planning is shown in several documents. But other documents also show that as early as Dec. 21, 1963, a memorandum from McNamara to President Johnson referred to "plans for covert action into North Vietnam" that "present a wide variety of sabotage and psychological operations" that should "provide maximum pressure with minimum risk."

This clandestine program became "Operation Plan 34-A," launched on Feb. 1, 1964. It was described in a National Security memorandum the next month as "a modest 'covert' program operated by South Vietnamese (and a few Chinese Nationalist)—a program so limited that it is unlikely to have any significant effect . . ."

One source yesterday said, in retrospect, that these covert operations were in fact "very modest—and highly unsuccessful." But they came to have profound significance in the Tonkin Gulf incident. McNamara, even in 1968 testimony reexamining the 1964 Tonkin affair, professed to know little about the plan 34-A operations. He told Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman J. W. Fulbright (D-Ark.) that they were carried out by South Vietnamese against the North, "utilizing to some degree U.S. equipment."

"I can't describe the exact organization," McNamara told Fulbright, although I will be happy to try to obtain the information for you."

It was charged by then Sen. Wayne Morse (D-Ore.) that the South Vietnamese attacks on North Vietnamese forces in the Gulf of Tonkin caused the North Vietnamese to fire upon U.S. destroyers Maddox and C. Turner Joy. McNamara, in 1968, told the Senate committee, however, that it was "monstrous" to insinuate that the United States "induced the incident" as an "excuse" to take retaliatory action. The retaliatory action was the opening rounds of U.S. bombing attacks upon North Vietnam.

According to the information disclosed by the Times, the Plan 34-A operations against the North during 1964 ranged from U-2 spy plane flights to parachuting sabotage and psychological warfare teams into the North Vietnamese citizens, sea-launched commando raids on rail and highway bridges and bombardment of coastal installations by PT boats.

These attacks were described as being under the Saigon control of Gen. Paul D. Harkins, then chief of the U.S. military assistance command, with joint planning by the South Vietnamese who carried out the operations themselves or with "hired personnel."

Even before these covert operations began, however, the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff were reported recommending "increasingly bolder actions" including "aerial bombing of key North Vietnamese targets" and use of "United States forces as necessary in direct actions against North Vietnam."

After the August, 1964, Gulf of Tonkin breakthrough to more open U.S. involvement in the fighting, the published documentation shows recommendations for considerably expanded covert operations against the North.

A memorandum prepared for Assistant Secretary of State William P. Bundy shows that part of the clandestine operations against the North were suspended immediately "after the first Tonkin Gulf incident" on Aug. 2, 1964, but that "successful maritime and airborne operations" were carried out in October.

The documents discuss clandestine operations carried out not only from South Vietnam but from Laos, against North Vietnam and against enemy-held areas of Laos. One docu-

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WASHINGTON STAR
14 JUN 1971

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STATINTL

A PROVOCATION STRATEGY?

How We Got Into the Vietnam War

Progressive American involvement in Indochina developed with far greater intensity than public statements under four administrations acknowledged, leading to a "provocation strategy" in late 1964 under President Lyndon Johnson.

That is a prime thesis of a secret and massive study on U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia that was made three years ago by the Pentagon under orders of Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara. The bulk of the 2.5-million word study has been obtained by the New York Times. A series of articles on the study began yesterday in that paper.

The study itself encompasses American policy in Indochina from the end of World War II to May 1968, when the Paris peace talks began.

In his column yesterday, James Reston said that "in the light of these documents (the Nixon administration's withdrawal seems) almost innocent compared to the deceptive and stealthy American involvement in the war under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson."

McNamara commissioned the study in June 1967, during a time of personal disenchantment with the war. The project took a year to complete and The Times calls it a "vast and highly unusual report of government self-analysis."

A team of 30 to 40 government officcials, civilian and military, made the study, which runs to nearly 40 volumes. It was completed in the fall of 1968, after McNamara's departure, and was "acknowledged" as completed but without endorsement by Asst. Secretary Paul C. Warnke, and then forwarded to the next defense secretary Clark Clifford.

Though the study ranges widely to explain events, The Times said in the first installment of its report, it makes no summary effort to put the blame for the war on any single adminisstration or to find fault with individual efforts.

Though called by the Times a far from complete study, the following conclusions and specific findings are included:

- The course of American policy was "set" by the Truman administration's decision to give military aid to France in her colonial war against the Communist-led Viet Minh.
- The Eisenhower administration had a "direct role in the ultimate breakdown of the Geneva settlement" for Indochina in 1954 by its decision to rescue South Vietnam from a Communist takeover and the attempt to undermine the new Communist regime in North Vietnam.
- A policy of "limited-risk gamble" inherited by the Kennedy administration was transformed into a "broad commitment" that left President Johnson with a choice between more war or withdrawal.
- Though Johnson was reluctant and hesitant to make the final decision, his administration intensified the covert warfare against North Vietnam and began planning in the spring of 1964 to wage overt war. The decision came, the Times reported, a full year before the Johnson administration publicly revealed the depth of its involvement and its fear of defeat.
- Growing clandestine military pressure through 1964 by the United States and the expanding bombing of North Vietnam in 1965 were begun despite the judgement of the government's intelligence community that the measures would not cause Hanoi to cease its support of the Viet Cong in the South and that the bombing was judged to be militarily ineffective within a few months of its inception.
- The American political, military, and psychological stakes in Southeast Asia were built during these four succeeding administrations often more deeply than they realized at the time.

Goal Was Containment

The Pentagon study suggests that the predominant American interest was at first containment of communism and later the defense of the power, influence, and prestige of the United States—in both stages irrespective of conditions in Vietnam itself.

Although the study provides much new information about the roles of senior officials of both parties and "a whole generation of military commanders, the Times notes that it displays "many inconsistencies and lacks a single all-embracing summary."

The study emerged as a middle-echelon and official view of the war, incorporating material from top-level files of the Defense Department and papers from the White House, State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The researchers—many of whom had helped develop or carry out policies they were asked to evaluate—did not have access to the complete files of the pareidents or to all memorandums of their conversations and decisions. The copy of the study obtained by The Times — only 6 to 15 ever were printed, according to various accounts—lacks a section on secret diplomacy during the Johnson administration.

Debate Recorded

"Throughout the narrative," The Times reports, "there is ample evidence of vigorous, even acrimonious, debate within the government—far more than Congress, the press and the public were permitted to discover from official pronouncements."

The study and the extensive documentation appended show also that once the basic objective of policy was set, the internal debate over Vietnam from 1950 until mid-1967 dealt almost entirely with how to reach these objectives rather than with the basic direction of policy.

The government—especially during the 1960s, was confident that American power or even the threat of its use would bring the war under control.

In addition, as some top policy makers came to question the American policy during 1967, the Pentagonreport shows, policy papers began seeking to limit not only the military strategies but began to worry about the impact of hte war on American society.

Absurdity Seen

John T. McNaughton in May, 1967 wrote McNamara: "The feeling is that we are trying to impose some U.S. image on distant peoples we cannot understand (any more than we can the younger generation here at home), and that we are carrying the thing to absurd lengths . . ."

Three years before, McNaughton had been one of the principal planners of the air war against Hanoi.

Among the subsidiary themes in the Pentagon study was that the American intelligence community repeatedly provided policy makers with what proved to be accurate warnings that desired goals either were unattainable or like to provoke costly reactions from the enemy. Despite occasional intelligence lapses, the study gives a generally favorable assessment of the CIA and other intelligence agencies.

The study found also that the United States over the years became so heavily committeed to the regime of the moment in South Vietnam and so fearful of instability that it was unable to persuade the South Vietnamese to make political and economic reforms that Americans felt were unecessary to win the allegiance of the Saigon citizens.

Questions Unanswered

The Pentagon researchers found no conclusive answers to some of the most controversial questions about the war, such as: Who took the lead in preventing Vietnam elections in 1956 required by the Geneva accords of 1954 — the Americans or Ngo Dinh Diem; Would President Kennedy, had he lived, have led the United States into full-scale ground warfare or an air war against the North as President Johnson did; was McNamara dismissed for opposing administration strategy in mid-1967 or did he ask to be relieved because of disenchantment with U.S. policy.

In The Times' second article, appearing today, the newspaper reports that a "general" consensus that air attacks against the

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North probably would have to be launched was reached at a White House strategy meeting in September, 1964, just after the Gulf of Tonkin attacks.

Affected by Campaign

The administration consensus on bombing, The Times says, came at the height of the presidential election campaign between Johnson and Sen. Barry Goldwater, whose advocacy of full-scale air attacks had become a major issue.

"That such a consensus had been reached as early as September is a major disclosure of the Pentagon study," says The Times.

The air war against North Vietnam began in February 1965, just after Johnson began his own term as president.

The study says th t "from the September meeting forward, there was little basic disagreement among the principals (senior policy makers) on the need for military operations against the North. What prevented action for the time being was a set of tactical considerations," The Times said.

Image Stressed

The first tactical consideration, The Times quotes the study as saying, was that "the President was in the midst of an election campaign in which he was presenting himself as the candidate of reason and restraint as opposed to the quixotic Barry Goldwater."

A memo from the Joint Chiefs in August, 1964, the study says, was the first appearance of a "provocation strategy" that was to be discussed at the September planning session at the White House where the pro-bombing consensus was reached.

This involved — in the words of the Pentagon study — "deliberate attempts to provoke (North Vietnam) into taking actions which could then be answered by a systematic U.S. air campaign."

President Johnson in a Texas speech on August 29 — less than two weeks before the September meeting — said that "... we think it is better to lose 200 men than to lose 200,000. For that reason we have tried very carefully to restrain ourselves and not to enlarge the war."

In February 1965, Operation Rolling Thunder — a sustained air war — was ordered.